

‘The Battered Looking and Middle-aged Barn-cock’: Or ‘An Old Fable Retold’

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It is often forgotten that Morris’s first attempt at creative writing for the socialist cause was ‘An Old Fable Retold’. This was his main contribution to the first number of *Justice* which appeared on 19 January 1884. This story – which in a modest way prefigures George Orwell’s *Animal Farm* – tells the tale of ‘a solemn conference’ of ‘the poultry of a certain country’ held just prior to Christmas to debate ‘the all important subject, “*with what sauce shall we be eaten?*”’¹ What follows is both an effective political satire and a humorous biographical sketch of Morris’s involvement in the Eastern Question Association (EQA), and the reactions to his subsequent conversion to socialism.

In ‘An Old Fable Retold’ Morris used many of the ideas and first-hand observations he had made during his pre-socialist political period. The fable parodies the progress of a typical national political movement, like the EQA, which distracted popular attention away from the more important issues of the class war and capitalist exploitation. All the usual features are there: the concentration on a peripheral issue (the ‘sauce’); the enthusiasm generated by the wisdom of ‘the great speeches of the evening’; the collusion of the working-classes who hold their own overflow meeting ‘on the neighbouring dung-hill’; the empty promises (the ‘very bantam *hens* were made happy by the assurance that their claims to cackling were to be seriously considered’); and the passing of the final meaningless resolution to be ‘forwarded to the farmer’s wife . . . and the head poulterer’.²

Morris also acknowledged his own role in what he now saw had been a meaningless charade. Few of his comrades reading the tale in *Justice* could have failed to recognise the Treasurer of the Social Democratic Federation as the ‘battered looking and middle-aged barn-cock’ who rose to address the meeting ‘in a lugubrious voice’.³ What follows is an amusing and astute parody of Morris’s own political development. At first this new speaker contents himself with ‘praising the career and motives of every advanced politician of the poultry yard’, an approach, which while boring the audience, provokes little hostility. This is clearly intended to poke fun at his earlier political naivete and the difficulties he encountered when he delivered his first speeches on behalf of the EQA on 19 December 1877 and 7 January 1878.⁴ Of the former meeting – held at Lambeth Baths – he wrote: ‘I did manage to get a few words out and get to an end’,⁵ while at the latter he had been profuse in his praise of Gladstone whom he described in

somewhat overblown rhetoric as 'The most illustrious statesman of England, the most single-hearted statesman in the world'.⁶

Having completed the first phase of his speech the 'battered' barn-cock's voice grows – symbolically – 'clearer and louder', and he continues:

'Sir, I know I have little right to air my own theories (cheers) after the remarkable and clear exposition of the rights of the poultry, which has been delivered in various ways on this platform to-night (loud cheers), but I am free to confess that one idea has occurred to me which seems to have escaped the more educated minds of our leaders to-night; – (cries of Oh, Oh) – the idea is this!' Here he stopped dead, and amid ironic cheers tried nervously to help himself to water from the long ago emptied decanter, then at last blurting out in a trembling, shrieking voice not without a suspicion of tears in it; 'in short *I don't want to be eaten at all*. . . .'⁷

Morris expected his readers at this point to recognise the parallel between the reaction that this admission produces on the assembled poultry, and that which greeted the declaration of his own conversion to socialism when he delivered his lecture 'Art, Wealth, and Riches' at the Manchester Royal Institution on 6 March 1883. Amongst the listening poultry,

. . . a storm of disapproving cries broke out, amongst which could be heard loudest the words 'practical Political', 'county franchise', 'great liberal party', 'municipal government for – Coxstead!' which at last all *calmed* themselves down into a steady howl of 'question, question!. . . .'⁸

The press reaction to 'Art, Wealth, and Riches' had similarly dismissed Morris's revolutionary beliefs as idealistic. Chief amongst the criticisms levelled against the bitter attack he made on capitalist society in this lecture was that he was presenting his audience with no practical remedies for the ills that he identified but was simply encouraging mindless discontent. In the *Manchester Examiner and Times* his views were contemptuously dismissed as 'unpractical'⁹ while the *Manchester Weekly Times* hoped that on subsequent occasions when he ventured into the sphere of political debate he would 'have something less impracticable and less discouraging to say'.¹⁰ This accusation of impracticality clearly stung Morris deeply for he later consistently used the same term as the worst possible form of abuse against those who urged parliamentary action and palliatives. As E. P. Thompson has so aptly written:

. . . the chorus of 'unpractical', 'misguided idealist', 'poet-upholsterer', and so forth, swelled to a crescendo the moment that Morris had found a *practical* remedy to the evils which he had before attacked, and had proclaimed himself to be a member of the *practical* revolutionary movement.¹¹

Against this background the conclusion of 'An Old Fable Retold' can be seen as Morris's symbolic and final rejection of parliamentary politics. While the chorus of indignant poultry's outrage echoes in his ears, the 'battered-looking' barn-cock

withdraws from the meeting – ‘apparently not much more depressed than when he first stood up’ – presumably to pursue his own revolutionary course outside on the dung-heap! The meeting, meanwhile, soon forgets his unwelcome contribution and amidst great rejoicing approves all the resolutions. They decide that ‘slow stewing was settled on as the least revolutionary form of ‘cooking’.¹² Reader, draw your own conclusion.

NOTES

- ¹ *Justice*, 19 January 1884, p. 2.
- ² *ibid.*, p. 2.
- ³ *ibid.*, p. 2.
- ⁴ See Eugene D. LeMire, *The Unpublished Lectures of William Morris*, (Detroit: Wayne State University, 1969), pp. 234-35.
- ⁵ Philip Henderson, ed., *The Letters of William Morris to his Family and Friends*, (London: Longmans, 1950), p. 103. Although Morris rejected Gladstone’s politics once he became a socialist he retained a certain admiration for him as a man. Gladstone is mentioned by name in no less than 76 of Morris’s articles in *Justice* and *Commonweal*.
- ⁶ May Morris, ed., *William Morris: Artist, Writer, Socialist*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1936), II, p. 379.
- ⁷ *Justice*, 19 January 1884, p. 2.
- ⁸ *ibid.*, p. 2.
- ⁹ *Manchester Examiner and Times*, 7 March 1883.
- ¹⁰ *Manchester Weekly Times*, 7 March 1883.
- ¹¹ E. P. Thompson, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary* (London: Merlin Press, 1977), p. 309.
- ¹² *Justice*, 19 January 1884, p. 2.